

Berta White:

# A Lifelong Dedication to Agriculture

Not many individuals who leave school and marry at age 14 have the chance to lunch with presidents, serve in a State legislature, or earn a college degree when a grandmother. But Berta Lee White, or "Bert" as she is best known, of Bailey, MS, has done all this—and more.

On State Highway 493 in Mississippi, Bailey is little more than an isolated post office serving a rural community north of Meridian. Yet Bert, who has traveled around the world several times on behalf of agriculture, calls it home.

Bert proudly proclaims she is a farmer. She has been a farmer all her life. She eloped when she was 14 to marry her school sweetheart, the boy next door, who was then 18. The marriage joined two neighboring 100-acre farms—parcels farmed by the couple's parents and grandparents.

During their early married years, Bert and her husband Gordon maintained the farm, but they worked off the farm to supplement their income. Gordon worked as an engineer. Bert served as a "hello girl" and assistant lineman for the telephone company founded by her parents in 1911.

"In many ways, we actually grew up and matured together," Bert recalls.

She drove a school bus for 7 years in the 1930's. There were unscheduled stops on Bert's bus routes during those years—stops she made to help breast-feed two children—one black, one white—whose mothers were unable to nourish them. The Whites had four children of their own. While many people look back on the Depression

years as a difficult time, Bert says it was a time of sharing and pulling together for rural Mississippians.

"We shared what we had and made the best of conditions," she recalls. "We didn't really think of ourselves as doing without. There was no electricity in rural Mississippi, so we weren't forced to do without conveniences.

"We had food from our gardens. We had a milk cow and our own livestock and chickens. No one in our area went hungry. You knew what your neighbors had and what they needed. There was an understanding that your garden was there to be shared."

## Her Career as a Leader

Soon after the Depression years, Bert became actively involved in community activities. She joined the Lauderdale

Believing that agriculture's future also depends on continued technological advances, Bert helped create the Farm Bureau's "adopt a scientist" program. Now in its third year, the program establishes exchanges between scientists from agribusiness companies and individual farm families.

The scientist lives on the farm for several days, exchanging information over the breakfast table, doing chores, and walking the fields. While no technological breakthroughs have been discovered yet through the program, Bert says the scientists involved have almost unanimously said they gained a far better appreciation for the pursuit of practical solutions and applications in their research.

County Farm Bureau, where she became a volunteer leader.

Bert's leadership abilities and motivational strengths were soon recognized. She was appointed chairman of the county Farm Bureau membership committee and built the roster from 17 to 75 families during her first year.

Many other volunteer activities followed, including membership on several local boards. Once she was named the top 4-H leader in Mississippi. In 1982, the State of Mississippi officially recognized her for "outstanding contributions to programs and support for the aging."

Her neighbors voted her into Mississippi's House of Representatives in 1964. Four years later they elected her to the State Senate, where she served until 1975.

While serving as a State Senator, she also enrolled at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. Following the close of the day's legislative session, she would drive 100 miles to attend classes; when the legislature was in recess, she would enroll as a full-time student. After 5 years of study, Bert earned a bachelor of science and arts degree in political science.

"College was one of the most interesting periods of my life," she recalls.

## Representing Farm Women

Bert used her political experience and knowledge to get farm women's input into the legislative debate over the 1985 farm bill. As a result of her prodding, State Farm Bureau women's committees generated 45,000 letters to elected officials in Washington, DC.

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*by Jack King, Director of News Services,  
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She currently serves as chairman of the Mississippi Farm Bureau women's committee and as national chairman of the American Farm Bureau Federation's women's committee, a position she has held for 10 years.

In an effort to create better public understanding of agriculture, the Farm Bureau women, under Bert, meet with the editors of the major consumer magazines. At these luncheons in New York City, farm women talk with writers who help shape public opinion.



*Playing many roles is nothing new to Bert White. Although a wife, mother, farmer, and chairman of the American Farm Bureau Federation Women's Committee, White remains active as a lobbyist on rural issues at local, State, and Federal levels.*

"Farmers don't fully recognize the importance of their communication role with the public," Bert says. "They work hard at what they do, but too often they assume the public automatically understands their role and why they operate the way they do.

"Farmers don't recognize their need to help the public develop a better understanding of agriculture. We have no choice. We have a responsibility to get involved and to relate to the public in terms they can understand."

Bert strongly emphasizes "Ag in the Classroom" projects (see Chapter 46) and is a tireless fundraiser for local programs in Mississippi. One of her pet projects now is promoting "The Choice is Yours," a computer program developed through the Farm Bureau's research foundation. Aimed at students in seventh through ninth grades, the software shows agricultural career paths. In describing the program, Bert says, "The future of agriculture depends on attracting capable youth into the industry."

It was through her work in the Farm Bureau that she became involved in the Country Women's Council and Associated Country Women of the World. She would eventually meet with Presidents Reagan and Bush to present the viewpoint of rural women on various issues. She has frequently testified before Congress, Federal agencies, and her State legislature, offering a statement for all of agriculture.

She has visited each of the 50 States and nearly 2 dozen foreign countries to rally women as defenders of agriculture. She wants to help farm women develop leadership abilities.

The Whites were married 54 years before husband Gordon's death in 1986; Bert has 10 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren. Since Gordon's death, Bert and their son Gordon have jointly managed the farm operation, raising crops and white-faced herefords on 250 acres.

Despite her 60 years of involvement as a wife and mother, a legislator, and a community and national leader, she still has a mission and a sense of work unfinished. She is driven by what she describes as the need to encourage farmers to become better communicators, to create better public understanding of farm issues.

To do this, she stresses that action must begin at home. Solutions to all issues will originate first with the people, she insists, not government.

Bert has participated in three trade missions coordinated by USDA. On these missions, she spoke to government leaders and farmers in the European Community, Asia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Turkey. In addition, she led a delegation of Farm Bureau women to Sweden, Germany, and Austria in 1988 to address foreign trade concerns.

"The goals and desires of farm women are the same around the world," Bert says.